

# Genesee Circuit Court Top-Notch Cash Collector

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One might think the Genesee County Circuit Court would get a big "attaboy" from the state Supreme Court for such accomplishments as processing caseloads or efficiently conducting trials.

But recently, the local court was recognized for something judicial officials say is just as important: Collecting money.

"Traditionally courts have been good about ordering people to pay fines and fees, but not good about collecting those fines," said Barbara Menear, the county circuit court administrator.

Getting that money has become critically important as the state's budget crisis has grown over the past few years.

Officials from the state Supreme Court recognized court efforts around Michigan, including a pilot project by the Genesee court aimed at getting the money people were ordered by judges to pay.

The efforts, which have been under way for the past couple of years, have resulted in dramatic increases in collections, Menear said, from about \$30,000 a year in the days before the collection projects to about \$600,000.

The strategies include:

- The court billing people who have unpaid fines and fees. "You don't pay a bill if you don't get a bill," Menear said.
- An office in the courthouse to take payments for fines. Now the circuit court has an office on the second floor of the circuit court building on S. Saginaw Street specifically to receive money judges have ordered people to pay. After judges impose fines, they tell people to stop by the payment office, Menear said.
- A collections hotline for those who owe fines to call and make arrangements or payments that is answered by real human beings. That number is (810) 257-2711.

"That's been extremely helpful," Menear said. "Those who call about their fine don't go into voice mail."

Some of the court's administrative staff also have been tracking down those who owe, not unlike typical bill collectors, she said, Using Internet databases and researching old police reports, staff members have found people who have owed money, but neglected to pay.

Not only have these court employees collected fines that went unpaid, they've also helped to deliver restitution payments that were never given to the victims of crime, Menear said.

"Some of these cases have been pretty dramatic," she said. "We had an embezzlement case from several years ago where an employee in a doctor's office was ordered to pay \$14,000 in restitution, and the employer didn't get that money until this project got going," Menear said.

"In another case, a little old lady who was beat up and robbed in a store parking lot got the restitution her assailant was ordered to pay. For a senior citizen on a fixed income, that was pretty important."